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The Numbering of Days.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF CHRIST

IN OXFORD,

On the Morning of the Second Sunday in Lent,
1883.

“Memento semper finis, et quia perditum
non redit tempus.”

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THIS Sermon is printed only in deference to the wish of some who heard it, and by the encouragement of their hope concerning it.

CHRIST CHURCH,

February 20, 1883.

PSALM XC. 12.

*So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our
hearts unto wisdom.*

FOR most of us, probably, the ninetieth Psalm is already linked with associations which distinguish it from almost every other part of the Psalter. We have heard it under conditions which must make most men alert and sensitive to receive impressions deeply and truthfully: and perhaps its simple, stately rhythm will never lose the echo of the minor chant with which it first fell upon our ears in the Order for the Burial of the Dead. During those few minutes at least our thoughts were almost perforce recalled from that indefinite anticipation of the things of this life in which they are accustomed to stray so freely and confidently: we were beckoned back, as it were, to be reminded of something which we had practically quite forgotten: and were compelled to realize, with the utmost attention of which we were capable, that a life like our own had come to an end; that the time of trial and choice was over; that the story was written and the book closed and clasped. Beyond, in the mysterious time and place of waiting for the Day of Judgment, there might be, by God's mercy,

a manifold course of growth, of purification, of enlightening:—but the battle was over: the time in which each day was ordered by the expectation of the next had stopped: this life had been taken out of the dead man's power: he could not get at it now to alter it or to disguise it: it had gone before the Judge. The words that come to us when our thoughts are thus arrested and controlled are almost sure to reach a deeper level of feeling than is ever stirred in the distraction and haste of ordinary life: and there are phrases in the ninetieth Psalm and the twenty-fifth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians which have, perhaps, more often touched the sources of penitence and of action in men's hearts than any other passages in the Bible.

The Office for the Burial of the Dead is very often and very widely praised for the beauty of its structure and for its power of consolation. And it has indeed a skill like that of noble and faultless music to bring order and harmony into the bewilderment and tumult of grief: to move over the stormy waters of a passionate sorrow, and allay them to a great calm: to bring men to a temper in which, whether sadness is really more or less, there is at least a stronger element of wisdom and of peace. But when we look beyond this vague and dimly-conscious change, and ask what are the lines of thought through which the Service tries to lead us, we find that they are strangely different from those which most men are apt at such times to choose as the nearest topics of general comfort. They lie utterly

apart from that tone of indiscriminate optimism and mutual indulgence, that wish to make everything easy to ourselves and others, into which our indolence so often slips: they seem to avoid even the truths which we should think most obvious and appropriate. There is in the Service comparatively little which helps us to linger upon the thought of God's Eternal and Infinite Love. Nor does it ever encourage us to forget the present and the actual, or liberate the intense feeling of the moment into any hazy imagination of the joys of heaven. It is not the time for us to be forgetting this world in unpractical speculations about the next: the Church will not so trifle with a great occasion of moral and spiritual influence, so endanger the moment of attention which the presence of the dead has won for her in the hearts of the living. The grave cannot praise God, death cannot celebrate Him: the practical effect of the Service must be for the living, for those who stand in silent, humble readiness to hear, in the controlling solemnity of that farewell: this is a time for the plain speaking of simple truth: and it is spoken, in the directness of the ninetieth Psalm and the relentless pressure of St. Paul's dilemma:—"The days of our age are threescore years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years, yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow; so soon passeth it away, and we are gone." "This I say, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin

is the law. But thanks be to God Which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." The certainty of death, and the dependence of all hope upon the truth of our Saviour's Resurrection and the merit of His Atonement,—these are the thoughts which are chosen to be associated with the lifelong memory of our sorrow and of our dead.

The plain duty and common sense of numbering our days needs indeed all the emphasis which it can receive from such associations. The ordinary tenour of our thoughts, the proportion according to which we divide our time and our interest, the careful avoidance of some subjects when we are talking with those much older than ourselves,—these with many other signs betray our natural reluctance to think of this life as coming to an end. And it may be that most of us escape from the certainty of the end into the uncertainty of its exact date: we look at the obscurity which hangs about the close of our days, until we forget that somewhere within that obscurity their close is absolutely sure. The anxiety and solemnity with which we should think of the day or year in which we are to die, could it be positively declared to us, is diffused and attenuated and almost lost among all the years at any point in which the end may come. Those practical inferences with regard to the use of our time and the value of our opportunities, which might come from realizing that our days are numbered, seem to lose point and force when we can say that their number is wholly hidden from our knowledge.

But there is another and a very real sense in which the meaning of the text is from time to time borne in upon us all, without the possibility of any such escape into the uncertainty of the future,—a sense in which we can often number our days quite definitely, and feel, beyond the possibility of self-deception, how the close of life bears upon its use and worth. For by the Providence of God our course through this world is divided into many stages; the indefinite time of our probation has its distinct and definite periods, each with its allotted opportunities, endowments, and responsibilities; each coming at last to its appointed close. When childhood ended, when all its blessings and privileges, used or abused, were done with, then boyhood opened before us; and we could number its days. We could foresee the very year in which its peculiar occasions of serving God Almighty, of doing good, of growing in knowledge and strength and holiness, would be irrevocably gone. We knew the date by which, if ever, our proper work in it must be done and our choice made. And now those numbered days are ended, even as it were a tale that is told: the incomparable influence which belongs to the later years of school-life, that vast and delicate power of affecting the thoughts and lives of others, that great range of example, we have done with them all: for good or evil, for God or for Satan, we have finished and yielded up that period of our probation: we cannot touch or mend it now: it has gone from us: it is with the Judge. And at its close another stage began,—the stage

through which most of you, brethren, are passing now ; the three or four years of Undergraduate life. And these also have their own irrevocable opportunities of good and evil,—opportunities of self-discipline, of moral and intellectual preparation for an honourable and effective life: above all, opportunities of raising or lowering the tone of a society most sensitive to the force of example, most difficult to touch in any other way; opportunities in every day of helping or discouraging some one in his silent effort or hidden longing after purity and holiness. It is easy to miss the opportunity: and every time you let it pass unused, you are strangely less likely to see it when it returns: you may not know at all, those who watch the place year after year but hardly and seldom know, God only always knows, the power of each single life that is lived here according to the Faith of Christ: but you can number the days of your probation here: you know very nearly when this stage too will be beyond your reach; when all its privileges and occasions, all that was given to you to be used here, all that God was willing to let you do in Christ Church, will be put away, with the record of what you were and what you did in childhood and at school; when you will not be able ever to get at one trust that you have neglected, one gift that you have abused, one life that you have misled. And so will it be, so is it with us all, even to that great end which is but faintly rehearsed as each period sinks from us into the inaccessible past. Time after time

Almighty God gives us a work to do; and we can number the days in which it must be done or spurned. He brings us into contact with one group after another of our fellow-men; and we can number the days during which we can uplift, neglect, or mar their thoughts and lives. From stage to stage He leads us on: and every stage has its irrecoverable powers and opportunities of good: "*pereunt et imputantur*:" the numbered days are gone at last, and all the means of doing those days' work are dead and buried: and we are one stage nearer to that end which seemed so distant and uncertain, but which now, perhaps, is clearer to us than it was: that end when all our days are gone: that night which surely cometh, and in which no man can work.

Nor is it only the end of this life which is rehearsed for each one of us as its several periods pass beyond recall. There is also surely at such pauses in our probation a rehearsal, an anticipation of that which lies beyond the day of death—a forecast of the great Act of Judgment. At such times as I have described, we are, whether we will or no, brought to an account: we are put on our trial: we have to face a verdict on our work. We can hardly help indeed being arraigned by our own conscience: it is almost inevitable that as the numbered days are taken from us we should recall their sins and offences, their waste and folly, their miserable vanities and omissions. But we are not left to judge ourselves. Even here we are arraigned before a truer court. We are tried by the requirements of a new position.

We are confronted with the needs, the duties, the responsibilities, for which in the bygone stage and by its buried privileges we should have been preparing ourselves. The knowledge, the experience, the self-control, the strength, the faith which we might have won in the years that are past, are presumed and demanded from us in the stage on which we enter next: "Of course," it is implied to us, "you are ready for your work in life: you have had admirable opportunities, plenty of time, advantages denied to many: here is the field in which to use all that you have gathered, all that you bring with you from the past." And we must answer something: the work is there before us: we are men now: we cannot ask for more time, for much indulgence: we cannot think of going back to try to make a better use of that which is utterly gone from us: whatever we are to do must be done with what we have: and it may well be that, as we look at our one poor unproductive talent, there may begin to sound in our ears some warning of that awful sentence: "Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed. Take the talent from him, and give it unto him that hath ten talents. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness."

No, not so, O Lord! It need not be so, brethren: for it is not only the end of this life, nor only the Judgment that is to come, which we can thus rehearse as the numbered days of each stage in our probation

take away with them their wasted and misused occasions. There is another thought which we may take at such a time from the merciful words of Christian burial: another point of likeness between the close of every period in this life and the great close of all: another truth which only makes it tolerable for sinful men to look back over the years that are past. "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be to God Which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." As one by one the opportunities of this life pass, like the dead, beyond the touch of our hands, beyond the sight of our eyes, we may, thank God, anticipate, and in some measure realize, not only what it will be to have done with this life altogether; not only what it will be to stand before the throne of the All-seeing Judge, and to recognise all our secret sins set in the Light of His Countenance; but also what it may be to see the merit of our Saviour's willing Death, and the infinite strength of His Redeeming Love thrust utterly away the dark record which we dare not read: and, as we hardly pray, "O turn Thy Face from my sins, and put out all my misdeeds: cast me not away from Thy Presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me:" to know ourselves accepted once again in the Beloved, and to hear the Voice of Him that sitteth upon the throne saying, "Behold, I make all things new." Yes, at every change in our life, at every pause in our career, we may forestall that final victory of the Love of God. When we could only turn discouraged and unready

from the things that are behind, sick at heart with the experience of all our failures, and the thought of all that we have missed or marred, then in the moment of our weakness is His Strength made perfect; and, by that miracle which brings to Christianity at once its most scornful critics, and the most unswerving love that human hearts can give, by the great miracle of our pardon because He has died, we can—through penitence and faith, in utter, thankful self-distrust—begin again. For “since by man came death, by Man came also the resurrection from the dead.” We need not fear to seek from Him the gift He died to win for us, if only we will strive henceforward to apply our hearts unto Him, Who, being indeed the Uncreated Wisdom, took upon Him our nature and was crucified for us. We may never be what once we might have been—means of grace, powers of work, sources of strength which once lay ready to our hands, may be lost to us now, never to be regained in this world; but we shall still find work to do, and strength and skill and grace to do it, if, as we turn to the days that lie before us, we feel that the failures of the past have taught us to say as we never said before, “The life that I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me:”

To Whom, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, might, majesty, dominion, and power, now, henceforth, and for evermore. Amen.

